



FACT SHEET

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Organic Farmers and the Social Economy

Social Economy Fact Sheet #04

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Birds' Eye View

Our interviews with carefully selected organic farmers in southern Ontario revealed an extensive network of contacts and cooperation between rural and urban associations of different kinds, many key leaders in the social economy.

Key actor: **Organic Meadow**, markets eggs, grain and dairy.

Ted Zettel, co-op founder, writes that:

"Organic Meadow was born out of urgent need, powerful vision and persistent determination. The urgent need was to have a means of getting our crops to the market. The radical vision was of a totally new food system that would deliver highest quality, certified organic, local food to a willing, well informed citizenry..."

Organic farming is closely allied to social enterprises, worker co-operatives, natural food co-operatives and recycling and is clearly recognized as a vibrant part of the social economy. But with time the same powerful interests that industrialized agriculture have begun to look at organic farming. This is just one of the challenges Sumner and Llewelyn identify as they examine how well organic farming meshes with community development.

Organic farming to preserve values over profits

Meeting health, market and environmental challenges since the 1920s

Organic agriculture began as a social movement in Britain in 1926, largely in response to the negative effects from the industrialization of agriculture, which were hurting public health and soil fertility, and had brought with it pest outbreaks and rural community breakdown.

Organic pioneers shared an ethic in which soil, crop, livestock, human and community health were all interconnected. Organic agriculture was not intended to fill a market niche, but rather to offer a more sustainable way of life.

Unlike the industrial paradigm, which concentrates power and wealth, commodifies the environment, exploits labour and undermines food security, the organic paradigm disperses power and wealth, works with the environment, treats labour fairly and supports food security. This approach is not nostalgia for a simpler time, but rather, a refusal to sacrifice all other values to a single-minded drive for yield and profit.

Over time, however, organic products' exploding market share caught the attention of the same powerful interests that industrialized agriculture in the first place.

Today, organic farming faces serious challenges. By definition, it questions the status quo, and its low-input, high-management ethic has led to its marginalization, leaving organic farmers with limited access to the knowledge essential to their development, as privately funded university research focuses on issues of interest to the agri-food industry.

Moreover, organic farmers lack vital inputs, such as organic grain, hay and manure. And they find it hard to access labour with the necessary skills. When they look for storage and processing facilities, they must deal with the lack of certified organic processors, partly because regulations favour large-scale operators.

Methods and Findings

We systematically selected 49 farmers from a list provided by the community partners in this project, to participate in qualitative, open-ended interviews, lasting from one to three hours.

Analysis of the resulting data reveals five, interconnected challenges in:

- production,
- processing/ storage,
- marketing,
- regulations and
- community.

We also found interactions among over 100 different social economy bodies:

- 19 producers' co-operatives,
- 3 consumers' co-operatives,
- 13 credit unions,
- 54 nonprofit mutual associations (13 economic and 41 social organizations), 13 public sector nonprofits and 25

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While largely successful in meeting these challenges, organic farmers now face a new set of challenges. One involves lack of access to markets for higher-priced organic meat and produce. Although such markets now exist in urban areas, shipping costs can be prohibitive.

The social economy: a strategic necessity

Resourceful as they are, organic farmers cannot overcome these problems as individuals. To do so, they have returned to their roots in the social economy, coming together to create, join and spread a range of social economy organizations, such as co-operatives and non-profits that, together, give them a collective power that they do not have individually, allowing them to act to protect and advance organic farming.

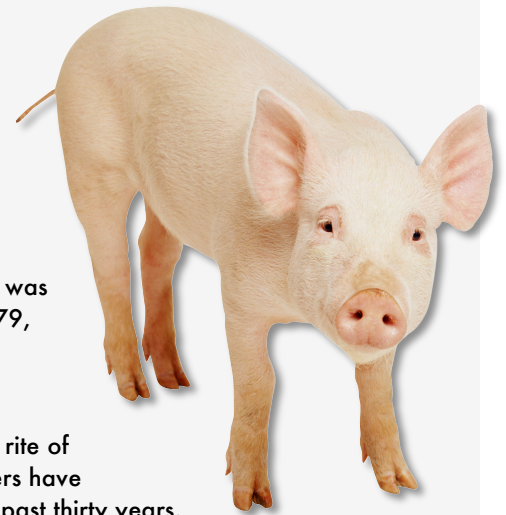
Two key organizations

Two key social economy organizations are the Ecological Farmers' Association of Ontario and the Canadian Organic Growers, formed to meet organic farmers' needs to knowledge, production input, marketing information and support.

The **Ecological Farmers Association** was founded in rural southwestern Ontario, in 1979, as a vehicle for farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing. Social support and membership has grown steadily ever since. Its *Introduction to Organic Agriculture* workshop has become a rite of passage for new organic farmers and members have developed considerable expertise during the past thirty years, through workshops, one-on-one mentorship, and other means.

The **Canadian Organic Growers**, meanwhile, began as an urban organization with a mandate to support networking and education among organic gardeners, consumers, farmers, and supporters. Early initiatives included the Heritage Seed Program (now a separate organization, *Seeds of Diversity*), founded in 1984. Today it has grown into a national networking and advocacy organization, overseeing the revision of the federal National Organic Production Standards.

Other organizations include the **National Farmers' Union** and the **Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario**, both of which support family farming and sustainable agricultural practices.



In short: A successful model for community building

A community is usually understood as "a social network of interacting people, usually concentrated into a defined territory" (Johnston). But communities of practice also exist, in which people with similar interests come together.

Organic farmers belong to both sorts and are therefore uniquely positioned to contribute to community development. Indeed, several studies indicate that in contrast to the ongoing crisis in agricultural communities, organic farmers have not only been succeeding, but also making vital contributions to rural community development, offering significant models for innovation.

To Find Out More

http://socialeconomy.utoronto.ca/english/project_pages/project_04.php